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Parenting a Transgender Child

The Basics

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The Facts

Transgender & gender diverse people have always existed throughout every society in the world.

Due to Transphobia, Violence, mistreatment & discrimination many do not feel it's an option to affirm their gender in our society.

Transgender people, as a result, are much more likely to experience mental health problems, homelessness & unemployment due to this lack of support & affirmation by the community.

The Trans Pathways Study conducted by the Telethon Kids Institute in WA found that has shown that 4 out of 5 transgender adolescents have self harmed, with an almost 1 in 2 rate of respondents having attempted suicide. These rates are much higher than those in the rest of society.

Studies have also shown that when transgender children's identity is affirmed by their peers & family, their rates of self harm & suicide fall back to similar rates to that of the general population.

This is why it is vital for you to support your child.

Medical advice & research indicates that the best course of action is to affirm your child's gender & let them progress at their own rate as they are ready.

Common causes for concern from parents & society, especially when talking about children, are typically that a child might be too young to know. Research has now shown that transgender children, & children in general, have quite a fixed sense of gender from the earliest ages and there is very little difference in this for transgender children. Think about at what age you knew you were a girl or boy. Given that for young children the only treatment is social transition, there is no medical intervention & no harm in letting your child see what fits them best. However, the potential harm done by refusing them that opportunity is significant.

This whole process might seem daunting at the beginning, however the early stages are the hard part, once you are past the social transition and all those conversations you have to have, educating everyone in your life, things get much easier to navigate. If it seems like hard work for you, imagine what your child is experiencing having to constantly explain themselves in the face of some pretty intrusive personal questions often from complete strangers.

Your child can still have an amazing happy, productive normal life, they will find love & do all the things you have hoped they would do, it just might look different to what you imagined. The outcome for them however is largely impacted by support they receive around them from family & friends.

This is an individual journey of your child's & there isn't a right or wrong way for them to navigate it, it's about listening to your child & following their lead,

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The Process

It's worth noting that there is nothing wrong with your child, they are not mentally ill just because they are transgender. However, they like anyone else, can still suffer from mental illness—they are in fact at higher risk for this especially when they aren't surrounded by supportive peers & family. It's therefore appropriate to ensure your young person has access to a counsellor or psychologist experienced in gender diversity to help them through any challenges they may face should they need one. Education on gender diversity isn't standard for psychologists & counsellors so please ensure you get one that's recommended for gender diverse folk as you want to ensure your child is receiving positive and supportive care. Be mindful of "conversion therapy" practices, as this is destructive to your child's wellbeing.

Social Affirmation

In young children the process is simply to socially affirm their gender. This means letting the child live as their affirmed gender, using the correct pronouns (she/her, he/him, they/them). There will likely be changes to hairstyles, clothing & all that entails affirming their chosen gender. There is nothing medically done.

Puberty Blockers

When Transgender children progress far enough into puberty, this can be quite distressing as their body changes in ways they don't want it to. The only medical intervention made is to commence puberty blockers after a thorough evaluation & review by a medical team. This is like hitting a pause button on puberty & is completely reversible. If the child stops the blockers, their puberty will recommence like normal. For a transgender child this is an important pause, to stop irreversible unwanted changes to the body & give the child more time to mature & make educated decisions on future treatment.

Hormone Replacement Therapy

At approximately age 16, should the teen wish to proceed with their medical transition, they can then commence Hormones for their affirmed gender. This will have the effect of letting their bodies develop the way they need them to in line with their affirmed gender. Both the hormone stage & blockers stage are only given after exhaustive reviews by a team of specialist doctors. In WA this is handled by the Perth Children's Hospital Gender Diversity Service.

Gender Affirmation Surgery

This is not available as an option until the child is over 18. In some circumstances trans men might be able to be considered for breast reduction surgery (Top Surgery) from age 16 up. It's important to note that not all transgender people need or want surgery.

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Terminology

Gender—this is the important one! Gender is in the brain, it's how you feel inside when you ask the question am I male or female, it is not biology, chromosomes or body parts. It's also important to distinguish between gender & sexuality as they are not the same. Gender is who you are, sexuality is who you love.

Pronouns—this is how you like to be referred to. Commonly she/her, he/him, they/them.

Cisgender—this is the word for those of us in the community whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth

Transgender—your gender does not match the one you were assigned at birth.

Gender Non Conforming— an umbrella term to refer to someone who does not conform to the usual norms of gender in society.

Non Binary— an umbrella term for any number of gender identities that sit within, outside of, across or between the spectrum of the male and female binary. A non-binary person might identify as neither male nor female both or other such as terms like gender fluid, trans masculine, trans feminine, agender, bigender or in many other ways on the spectrum.

Gender Dysphoria—this is a persistent distress relating to one's physical sex characteristics or assigned sex not aligning with gender. Lots of transgender people experience this but not all.

AMAB/DMAB—Assigned Male at Birth/Designated Male at Birth

AFAB/DFAB—Assigned Female at Birth/Designated Female at Birth

Transition/Affirmation—the process of moving towards living as their true gender. It may involve only a social transition or can extend to medical & legal changes.

Conversion Therapy—a harmful process of trying to divert the person back to their gender assigned at birth.

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How to support a Transgender Loved One

There are some changes to language that are helpful when talking about this subject. When a child (or adult) shares something so important with you as their feelings about their gender, they are divulging something very personal & it's important to receive it with compassion & understanding. This used to be referred to as "Coming Out" however recently there's been a shift to more positive language & we now call it "Inviting in" as the person is trusting you enough to share their most vulnerable thoughts & feelings & inviting you into the process. It is a privilege & should be acknowledged as such.

The process of affirming their gender is also an important terminology change. You will hear words such as "transition" used to reflect the process of moving from living life as one gender to another, however the community is moving towards more positive terms like "affirmation". The term "transition" implies a change, but for the transgender person, they have always been that person inside so finally expressing their true gender is more an affirmation of what was always there.

It may be a shock, you may feel totally uneducated & overwhelmed but the important thing is to show your love & support to them through words & actions, even if you don't understand it, this is what your child needs:

Do

- Let them know you love them unconditionally & if you don't understand right now, you will learn & be by their side
- Immediately ask if they would prefer a change to pronouns or name, what they would prefer & use them straight away.
- Respect their privacy & don't disclose to anyone without permission
- Respect their feelings, if they aren't ready to let the world know straight away, they should proceed at a pace that is comfortable for them.
- Thank them for trusting you enough to share something so important
- Support them by doing, whether it be getting their haircut, a new wardrobe or just being out and about proud with them.
- Find your own support & avenues to learn more, it's not your child's job to educate you
- Get involved in the gender diverse community, it's an amazing community full of wonderful people & you will feel so thankful that your loved one has amazing people around them to support them.
- Learn the terminology & use it appropriately
- Keep a handle on your fear & preconceived ideas. For a parent it can be terrifying to think your most precious child will be treated the way we have seen the world treat the transgender community. It's quite visceral for a parent & protective mode comes out which can make it seem like you are unsupportive, when in actual fact you are just terrified for your kiddo.
- Stand up to transphobia when you see it. Have zero tolerance for family & friends disrespecting your child's identity. It may mean you will lose some people in your life but you have to draw firm boundaries with others so they know exactly what you expect from them.
- Ask positive, open-ended questions like:
 - Tell me more about how you are feeling?
 - Is there anything I can do to make things easier?
 - I'd love to learn more about being transgender do you have any good sites you would recommend I look at?
- Be your child's best advocate to support them having positive experiences in the community.

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Don't

- Argue all the reasons you think they could be wrong—trust me they have thought about this deeply for a long time & have done all the research.
- Ask them to hide it from people or keep it secret to make you more comfortable. Sometimes fear will make parents want to do this to avoid bad experiences. Hiding & secrecy reinforces the notion that there is something to be ashamed of & impacts the person's ability to form meaningful support networks outside the family.
- Tell your child you are mourning the loss of a child. While some parents commonly experience what they think is grief, what we later learn is we never lost anyone or anything real. The person we thought we were grieving is still there & has always been there. We were grieving an idea, a figment of the imagination, the picture in our heads of our kids future & what we gain is so much greater than any perceived loss.
- Subject your child to your doubts or thought process on this. If you need support, that is absolutely ok, there are lots of parent support networks out there for you to access. It's not your child's job to help you work through this. If you don't understand, or have doubts, that's for you to workout separately from your child. This is what your child needs—so do it full stop, no questions.
- Worry about if they change their mind, if they do, they do. Gender is sometimes not just an end point, it can be a journey of experimentation for some to find the right fit for them. However, if they tell you what their fit is, believe them. They know themselves much better than you do.
- Don't make a big deal when you mess up pronouns, simply apologise & move on. You will make mistakes at the start, there are habits to change, as long as your child sees you genuinely trying that's important.
- Try & divert your child back to their birth gender by denial, punishment or any other tactic. This is harmful to your child & is known as conversion therapy. Conversion therapy has now been outlawed in many states & countries.
- Refer to your child using their old name (Deadname). Even when talking about history pre transition. Use their preferred name & gender always.
- Share old photos from before their affirmation without their permission. For some people this can cause distress so please discuss with your child how they feel about displaying all those items from before.

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Helpful Resources

Parent Support

These groups run peer parent support networks & can get you connected with education & support. They also host great resources on their websites:

Transfolk of WA

www.transfolk.org

<https://www.facebook.com/TransFolkofWA>

PFLAGWA

www.pflagwa.org.au

<https://www.facebook.com/pflagperth>

Parents of Gender Diverse Children

www.pgdc.org.au

<https://www.facebook.com/parentsogenderdiversechildren>

Transcend

<https://transcendaus.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/transcendsupport1>

Other Support

Perth Children's Hospital Gender Diversity Service

<https://pch.health.wa.gov.au/Our-services/Mental-Health/Gender-Diversity-Service>

Qlife (Free LGBTI Peer Support Counselling)

Qlife.org.au

1800 184 527

Lifeline 13 11 14

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

HeadSpace

<https://headspace.org.au/>

Minus18

<https://www.minus18.org.au/>